

Redefining, renaming and reclaiming symbols

Three summers ago I spent a week at a camp with my partner, Dennis, and our two sons, along with Dennis' brother and his family. We four parents had our hands full with six small children. There was little time to spend with adults alone except late at night when the kids were in bed. There was even less time for my sister-in-law and me to talk alone. But one morning the two of us found ourselves in the kitchen without kids. We decided to give each other a pedicure and then, with the assortment of bottled colors between us, to paint each other's toenails. One of us remarked that we were having our own footwashing service.

It was only after much reflection and time that I realized the significance of that shared experience. This redefining of the symbolic footwashing created for me a faith connection to my life experience. The redefining was energizing.

My reflection included my own growing-up experiences with the footwashing service. During my teenage years footwashing was a positive yet limiting experience. Because it was part of the communion services, the time spent in having my feet washed and washing someone else's feet was quite short. We also washed each other's *clean* feet. Something was missing in that teenage experience which I discovered and redefined in the shared experience with my sister-in-law.

I also reread how Jesus defined the symbol of footwashing in the Holy Scriptures. He took a common practice, gave it a new meaning and made it holy. In Luke's gospel, the author recounts the disciples' argument



about who was the greatest. Luke records Jesus' verbal response to this argument but not the demonstrated object lesson. It is John who describes in his gospel Jesus' washing of the disciples feet.

Jesus uses the common practice of washing feet to demonstrate that the role of the greatest is to serve. After walking on dusty roads, a person's feet were quite dirty. So when people arrived at their destination, the servant of the house would wash the guests' feet. Jesus takes this common practice and gives it a holy meaning it was not intended to have. He adds a twist by changing the person doing the washing.

In a similar way, I have redefined a common practice of pedicures and toenail painting because of the experience in the kitchen with my relative. Because women seem to be always "on our feet," to take care of our feet is to take care of ourselves. To attend to someone else's feet, to give color, the color that the person chooses, is to care for her as she would take care of herself. Because of the mutual caring, a pedicure and a toenail painting are given a holiness they were never intended to have. Rather than seeing painted toenails as a seductive symbol they become a symbol of adding color to mutual caring.

I was curious about who else had become energized through the process of reflecting on and redefining, renaming or reclaiming symbols in their lives. This became my focus for compiling this issue of *Women's Concerns Report*.

In looking over the articles, I see a wide variety of symbols, including Christian symbols, fences, motherhood, Christmas, cape dresses and dirt. In each of these articles, the author seems to have experienced a lack of connection between the traditional symbol and her own life experiences. It is through the process of seeing the symbol in a new light that more closely connects with her own life that each author redefines, renames or reclaims the symbol. In some cases the symbol seems to reclaim the author. The process gives both the symbol and the writer an energizing connectedness, a wholeness. In the poetry, the poet helps us see how musical symbols can be given two different names, depending on one's perspective.

As you read these articles and the books in the bibliography, I encourage you, the reader and the shaper of your expression of faith, to take a look at the symbols in your life. Which of them reflect and connect with your experience? Which do not? Which ones have you reshaped? Which have blessed you with an energizing connectedness?

—Rhoda Stoesz, compiler

Rhoda Stoesz is a married mother of two children, ages 11 and 8, living in Goshen, Ind. She graduated last year with a bachelor's degree in elementary education. Her interest in the form and function of symbols began in a theology class at Goshen College.

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"When was the last time you looked at dirt and thought of its cleansing properties?"

"Dirt is not something we typically think about sharing with our close friends in order to enrich our friendship. There are times when the practical application of dirt is the most useful cleanser available, both while camping and within friendships."

by Jeanne Liechty

The cleansing properties of dirt (and other forms of grace)

Camping in a desert accentuates certain camping skills that could slip by unnoticed in an environment with ready access to water. Recently I was camping with a friend, Yolanda, in the Needles District of Canyonlands National Park, Utah. This was my first exposure to canyons and desert. We had initially planned to backpack, but when we reached the park and learned that no water sources were dependable other than the spigots at the campground, we decided that adding six gallons of water to our packs, in addition to the tent, sleeping bags, first aid and food, might make this a less than enjoyable (though memorable) experience. So we changed our plans and enjoyed day hikes, carrying a little less than two gallons of water each day, returning to the campground and water source each evening.



After one of our tasty evening meals, I looked at a particularly greasy pan and realized that our standard "rinse with a bit of water and scrape off the stubborn stuff with your spoon" method would not suffice. Since soap is to be used sparingly, if at all, because of its destructive potential to the immediate environment, I looked at Yolanda, perplexed. She replied, "Oh, that one's going to require some dirt."

Sure enough, a few tablespoons of dirt rubbed around inside the pan removed all the grease. I simply rinsed off the excess soil and the pan was clean and ready for the next meal.

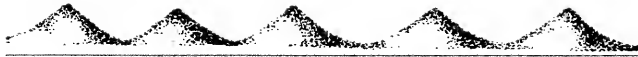
When was the last time you looked at dirt and thought of its cleansing properties? Dirt is not commonly used as an agent of cleanliness, nor as a metaphor for it.

Camping trips tend to be respite from the routines of daily life. Yet within these vacations I discover valuable metaphors for understanding more routine aspects of my life and relationships. This time around it was dirt.

Dirt is not something we typically think about sharing with our close friends in order to enrich our friendship. Dirt is something we would rather conceal or quickly clean up before anyone else becomes aware we have made a mess.

But what happens when we step back from this standard of constant cleanliness, or at least the appearance of cleanliness? Is cleanliness always next to godliness? In my experience, there are times when the practical application of dirt is the most useful cleanser available, both while camping and within friendships.

There may be patterns in our relationships and in the way others perceive us that we do not like or understand. One of my own patterns is that of friends being put off and afraid to share a personal struggle or failing with me because of a perception of me as "perfect." "Perfect" is far from my own experience of myself. Recognizing and then reconciling this dichotomy is often painful. Discovering a barrier between myself and my friend is distressing. I am also hurt by my



"I have had 12 days not to get ready for Christmas but to live Christmas."

friend's misperception and misunderstanding of who I am. Moving through these confusions includes reminding us both of the struggles and vulnerabilities that I have shared with my friend.

Sometimes it also includes realizing that there has been an imbalance in the friendship. If I want the friendship to grow, I need to share more of my "wilderness" and struggles in addition to my triumphs. With such sharing, it is amazing how cleansing and restorative a little bit of "dirt" can be.

"Cleansing" is also an attribute sometimes given to God, or God's grace. God's cleansing is symbolized by blood or water rather than by dirt. My earliest associations to God are of Sunday morning church services, wearing my best dress and clean Sunday shoes and sitting quietly on the bench in the sanctuary. But as I have grown, I have also come to experience facets of God and myself in the wilderness—parts of the world where you cannot go unless you are willing to sweat, physically exhaust yourself, cohabit with bugs of all kinds and use dirt in creative ways. There I enjoy the slightly different standard of cleanliness that the wilderness requires.

Friends are my teachers in the wilderness of God's creation, teaching me how to engage and respect the wilderness, as well as how to survive in it. Friends also teach me about the wilderness of my soul and how to use dirt in restorative and cleansing ways.

Jeanne Liechty practices as a clinical social worker on an adult in-patient psychiatric unit and in a small private practice in Cambridge, Mass. She enjoys interacting with and observing the natural world as a way of maintaining perspective and balance.

by Ann King-Grosh

Reclaiming the 12 days of Christmas in Ethiopia

Our family enjoys living in a country where we can celebrate Christmas twice a year. Our Christmas season spans 12 days, from the Western Christmas on December 25 to the Ethiopian Christmas on January 7 (following the Ethiopian Orthodox calendar year). This allows us to take our time celebrating family traditions we have developed over the years.

Beginning on Western Christmas, we start to fill a "Jesus stocking," not with presents but with pieces of paper on which each of us writes what we are doing for someone else in Jesus' name during those 12 days. On Ethiopian Christmas we empty the Jesus stocking and present our gifts of service to him.

We don't experience the hurry and frenzy of "getting ready" for Christmas because Christmas is not associated with gift giving in Ethiopia nor is it preceded by a commercial season with radio, TV and newspapers constantly reminding us how many days we have left to shop, decorate and bake. If we want to bake and decorate we do. But we never feel obligated to do more than we wish.

As a mother I find Christmas here relaxing, a special 12-day season that my family and I begin and end with celebrating God's gift of Jesus to us. When we have finished celebrating Ethiopian Christmas on January 7 I feel energized to move on. I have been blessed by family and friends. I have had time to ponder in my heart and reflect on what Christmas means for me. I don't feel guilty for having the day pass in a blur in front of my eyes because I have had 12 days not to get ready for Christmas but to live Christmas.

With husband, Jerry, Ann King-Grosh directs MCC and Eastern Mennonite Missions programs in Ethiopia. Ann is from Atglen, Pa., and is a member of Gingerich Mennonite Church in Lebanon.

"We made a pact that if we were in an accident together the least injured would remove the capes of the rest of us before the ambulance arrived."



by Carolyn Schrock-Shenk

From bondage to freedom: Cape dresses redefined

When I was 17 and my friends and I wore cape dresses, we made a pact that if we were in an accident together the least injured would remove the capes of the rest of us before the ambulance arrived. We were that embarrassed by them.

Recently I saw Heidi Beth at the Lancaster County Library and she was wearing a cape dress, along with her earrings and cut hair. I said, "Heidi Beth, is that a cape dress you are wearing?"

"Yes," she replied, obviously pleased with herself.

"Did you buy it at Goodwill or something?" I asked, thinking she must have bought it because it was an exceptional bargain or because she didn't know what it was. Heidi Beth did not grow up Mennonite.

"Oh, no, I had it made," she said, doing a little dance step.

"Why?" I asked in disbelief. Heidi Beth is an unusual person. Every Monday night from 9:30 to 10:30 at her house people do creative dance movement for relaxation. They do ceremonial drumming in her living room. Her husband does mime.

"Several years ago I was doing dance therapy in New York City with mentally ill male prisoners. I wanted to wear something modest, and I needed to be able to move freely. So I had a Lancaster County Mennonite woman make several of these dresses for me. I keep wearing them because I love them. Cape dresses are so comfortable and freeing. The wide flowing skirt, together with the cape, makes me feel modest and completely free to move in whatever way I want without feeling sexually suggestive."

To her the cape meant freedom. To me it had meant anything but freedom.

Carolyn Schrock-Shenk directs MCC's Mennonite Conciliation Service. She is a member of Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster. She lives with her husband, Dave, and their 6-year old son, Caleb.

"This quilt is a symbol that the sacred will find its own course to flow."

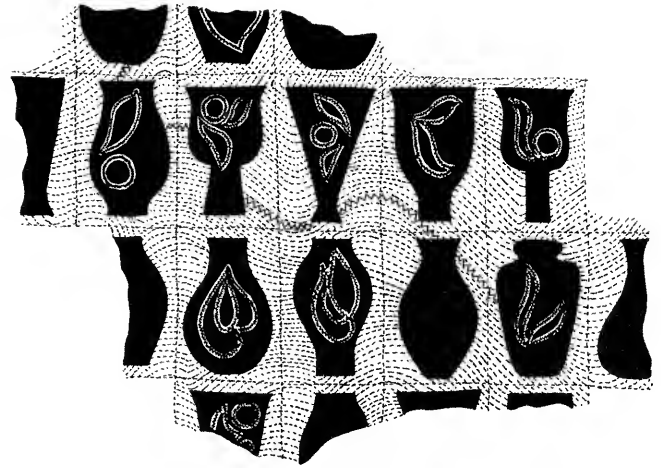
by Kathleen Hull

Of symbols and spiritual things: Reclaiming and being reclaimed

Waiting to be hung on the wall of my study in my newly acquired house is a quilt that was four years in its creation. This quilt was an unplanned interruption of a series of quilts exploring the lives and relationships of the women in my family. It is a theological, spiritual essay—a nontraditional essay without printed words or linear thought. If the stacks of files of crisp white papers in my study, all neatly stapled and footnoted, are symbols of my thirst for exploring religious studies through academia, this quilt is a symbol that the sacred will find its own course to flow.

For a year all my other design ideas were interrupted and sidetracked by the thought of expressing theology through a quilt. After a year I gave in and began to carefully research and explore various religious symbols. I knew I wanted to use one symbol that had basically fallen out of use—one that was decidedly feminine. And I wanted a second very traditional, very familiar symbol that I could reclaim in a new way. As it turned out they were one in the same. The cup, a solid Christian symbol, has also been a symbol for the womb of the divine. As I researched shapes of chalices and cups I realized the distinction between ancient vases and chalices is not clear. What was described as a chalice in one book would in the next be named as a vase. I delighted in the wide variety of shapes I discovered and was amazed at how many reflected the shape of a part or a whole of women's bodies. As I experimented with the paper cut-outs of chalices I discovered even the most distinctive shapes turned upside down resembled the shape of at least one vase I had found. As I researched and designed, an article in the Summer 1995 edition of *Groundswell*, "Feminist Symbols in Christian Liturgy," by Carol Kilby, provided me with the final confirmation that the symbol of the Chalice/Vase was the inspiration and the motivation for this quilt struggling to be born.

The quilt called "Vase and Chalice" was completed in April of 1997. Appliquéd onto rectangular backgrounds of white, black or gray—the light, the dark and the in between reality of balance or confusion—there are twelve alternating rows



of nine vases and nine chalices. Each vase and chalice has its own unique color that deepens in shade as it repeats row after row. On all but one of the vases and chalices is a varying motif of flames and circles—symbols of inspiration and wholeness. These motifs are worked in a variety of techniques from paint to embroidery to beading, adding texture and light. The background is quilted in wavelike lines—thirst quenching, life-giving water. Each vase and chalice is connected to several others by a zigzag of colored embroidery thread skimming back and forth across the surface of the quilting.

This quilt, through its design and working, has become for me the best expression of how I not only understand the Divine but how I understand myself and the world I am a part of. Created in the womb of God, in the image of God, I am shaped by that image. I am colored by my ancestors and shaded by my experiences. I am textured by my relationships. I am unique unto myself, yet I am part of something much greater. This shape, this image I have been gifted with by the Creator, holds a wine that will sour if it is not poured out to others in celebration and healing. My example is clear. It holds a responsibility and a joy that leaves me trembling.

"To reclaim a symbol that has been too long tainted by a theology of suffering was too great a personal task."

The making of this quilt was a new experience of consciously reclaiming the symbols of the chalice and the vase, water and fire. It was a natural process for someone who, I have come to realize, has been unconsciously claiming and reclaiming symbols of relationships all her life. But before the quilt was finished the next new experience was upon me, that of finding myself being reclaimed by a symbol.

When I first began to search for the traditional symbols for the quilt I knew without question I could not use the cross. To reclaim a symbol that has been too long tainted by a theology of suffering was too great a personal task. But the sacred finds its own course to flow.

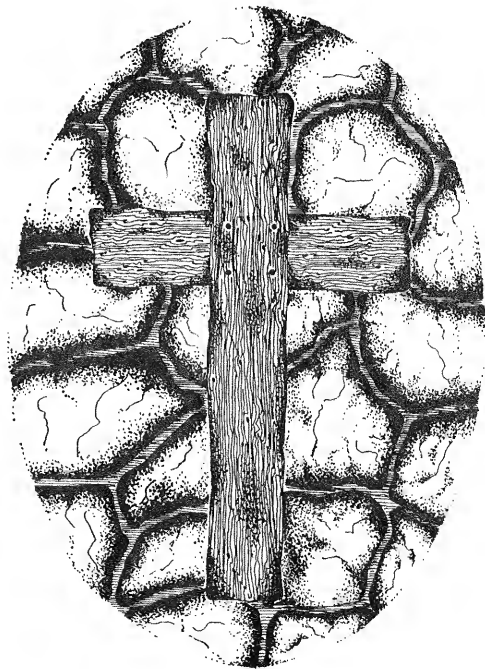
A year ago, while taking a writing course from Madeline L'Engle at the Vancouver School of Theology, I found myself in the position of doing a liturgical dance to a wonderfully lyrical piece of music that expressed human relationships with God. It was to be presented at a morning chapel service. As the chapel was in constant use with summer classes, rehearsals took place in a variety of alternative spaces. Nervous about the number of people, and focused on intertwining my movements with the voices and lyrics, I paid little attention to my surroundings other than having enough floor space. For the first three verses I was to dance the chorus only—running one third of the way up the aisle, moving through a series of steps then freezing in a kneeling position with hands and face looking upward. Each chorus would bring me closer to the front. The last verse I would dance at the front of the chapel, followed by a final repetition of the chorus.

As I entered the chapel that morning and watched my musician classmates take positions up front, I noticed what I would be dancing into. Hanging from a cold stone wall was a very large hard wooden cross. I longed to have back the butterflies of nervousness as my stomach congealed into a heavy lump. Dancing through the first chorus I managed to avoid looking directly at the cross. The second chorus brought me too close for complete avoidance, so I stared instead at the stones beside the cross. As I rose to begin the chorus for third time I ran straight to the front of the chapel and danced essentially at the foot of the cross. But instead of running into this cold hard symbol of suffering and pain I found myself in a place like no other. My body moved to the music of its own accord, and my spirit soared and bathed in warmth and life. As the music ended and I rose, my body slowly feeling like my own again, I looked out at face after face glistening with tears. I stared at that cross throughout

the rest of the service. It was a large wooden cross on a stone wall, yet it did not seem cold or hard. It was textured, and the light that flowed through the windows colored and shaded it in warm browns and grays.

I still struggle with the symbol of the cross; I have not been able to fully reclaim it. Yet it feels as though it has in some way reclaimed me. It is enough for now that there is at least one representation of this symbol, and one memory that fills me with warmth and light. This experience has also given me hope for other traditional symbols of the Divine that I had cast aside as meaningless for me. Several scratchy poems have found their way to my pen asking what would it take to name God as other than Creator. Perhaps even father?

Kathleen Hull lives, works, studies, writes, quilts and relates in Winnipeg, Manitoba.



" 'You need to put up a few fences, a few walls. You are too open. Too vulnerable. You need to protect yourself.' "

"I told myself that I needed to be available at all times, responsive to others' needs, always giving and generous, and forever people-oriented."

by Suzanne Yoder

Fences and boundaries

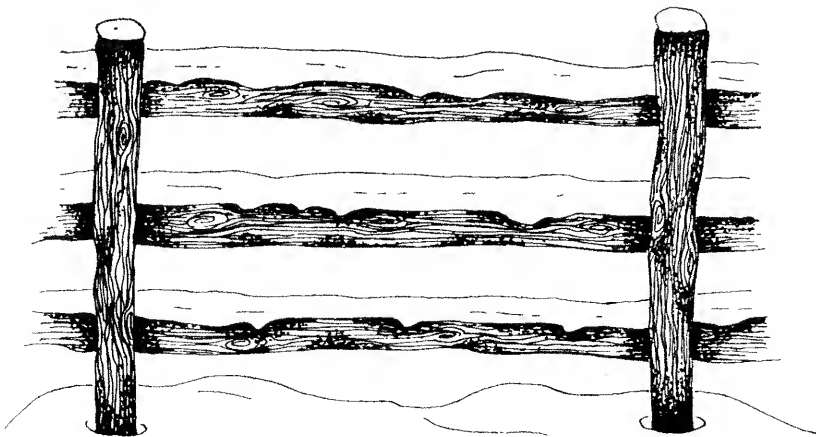
How do you feel when you see a neighbor building a fence? What are your thoughts when you walk through a neighborhood where everyone has a fence and there are growling dogs on the other side? I once had a personal aversion to fences. On the one hand, outside the fence, I felt shut out and unwelcome; on the other hand, from inside I felt closed, private, selfish and self-centered. I wondered about others' secrecy and selfishness. I hadn't been able to affirm my own need for privacy. It took encountering the significance of fences on three continents before I finally changed my aversion into an acknowledgement of the symbolic and spiritual importance of fences.

Some years ago when I was working through some psychological pain with a friend, she suggested, "You need to put up a few fences, a few walls. You are too open. Too vulnerable. You need to protect yourself."

My reaction was, "No, the ideal is to be secure enough and strong enough to be able to be real, vulnerable, transparent, open and honest—all those good things. After all, I have nothing to hide, and if someone criticizes me or challenges me for something, it is for my own good. That is my chance to change and to improve myself."

Later in a counseling course I learned about the concept of setting boundaries—the idea of creating limits and knowing what lines one has drawn in relationships, duties and responsibilities. Again my response was to feel an aversion for this concept. I told myself that I needed to be available at all times, responsive to others' needs, always giving and generous, and forever people-oriented.

The winter following my introduction to this idea, I was in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia during a heavy snowstorm. The scenery was exquisite. The wood fences were coated with five inches of snow. Even the wire fences were outlined in a layer of white. More and more fences of various mediums, purposes and styles caught my eye. I began collecting photographs of their uniqueness. Each was beautiful and acceptable. Each was perfect in its own setting. They added interest to the rolling hills and mountain scenery. They served a function. Some defined pasture land for cows; others kept the horses in. Some marked boundaries between neighbors. A few were "just for pretty."



"Seeing these fascinating displays of fences in my own country, as well as in Europe and Africa, has inspired me to look again at the positive, acceptable role of setting boundaries."

"Fences also remind me to prevent burnout, to keep God's 'yoke easy and his burden light,' to remember the limits Jesus set as he walked away from the push of the crowd or spent time reflecting in the desert and away from his duties."

In southern France, in the suburb of Aiguelongue in Montpellier, there are walls built of age-old rocks highlighted with poppies and oxeye daisies, and brick walls confirming long-standing boundaries between families. They provide form for an olive orchard and for the vineyards scattered across the hillsides. They provide security, privacy and scenery, besides keeping the dogs in. Iron gates and heavy, carved, wooden doors displaying wrought-iron hinges and door knobs are a reminder that communication remains important and possible. In the Jura Mountains fences serve additional purposes. They keep the cows in the pasture, and they protect tourists from approaching too close to the edge of precipices at castle ruins or at panoramic overlooks.

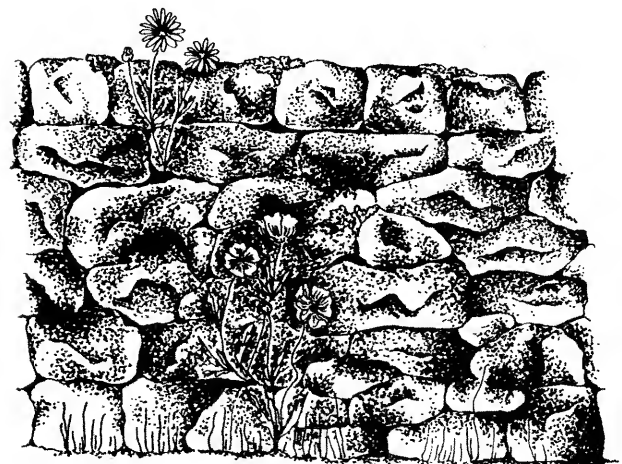
I recently returned from working in central Africa with MCC. There in Burundi I discovered many varieties of fences surrounding Africans' properties and encircling their homes, whether large or small. Every thatched roof hut or cement block house covered with metal roofing or tiles was surrounded by a protective *urugo* (*urugo* means the entire living compound, including fence, courtyard and hut; *urugo* also means specifically the fence). Traditionally the purpose of these enclosures was to keep out the lions. Now they define a homestead and allow discretion and privacy, which are important values in Burundian culture. They mark the area where grass and weeds will not be allowed to grow and where the earth will be swept clean daily to prevent snakes from living near the house. They keep the neighbors' goats outside and discourage petty thievery. I was fascinated by the beauty and amazing variety of each original fence made with bamboo, sisal, euphorbia, tree branches, slabs of wood, stakes lined up with tops carved to sharp points, rocks, or flowers such as crowns of thorn or bougainvilleas.

Seeing these fascinating displays of fences in my own country, as well as in Europe and Africa, has inspired me to look again at the positive, acceptable role of setting boundaries. Fences have become a symbol for that

psychological concept and for a religious and spiritual reality. Besides symbolizing my psychological limits, a fence becomes a symbol of limits on human behavior set in the Bible. Fences also remind me to prevent burnout, to keep God's "yoke easy and his burden light," to remember the limits Jesus set as he walked away from the push of the crowd or spent time reflecting in the desert and away from his duties.

A fence is a symbol giving me permission to have moral limits—to do my best to keep the good in and the bad out. It reminds me that there is much in life I can control and limit in order to live a life in balance, a life of moderation and simplicity, a life of choices. A fence reminds me that I can say "yes" and I can say "no."

Suzanne Yoder lives in Davidson, North Carolina. She worships at the Davidson Friends Meeting. She is a trained counselor who prepares workshops on forgiveness and other religious/psychological subjects. She is married to Lauren W. Yoder. They have served five years as volunteers with MCC. During the past two years they have worked in central Africa, from where they have recently returned.



"I assumed when I grew up I would get married and have children. As a teenager, my friends and I would stuff pillows under our shirts and pretend we were pregnant."



"Rituals are important ways to affirm and confirm one's reality."

by Yvonne Stoesz

Redefining and reclaiming what it means to be mother and Mennonite

I am an adoptive mom and a foster mom, but mainly just a mom.

When we adopted our daughter at 4 months of age, a friend asked me if I would breast feed her. My daughter had been bottle-fed for three months in a foster home. My friend seemed to have an assumption that all mothers were lactating mothers, that the definition of mother includes producing milk.

I was not a lactating mother and maybe never would be. I have had to search for other mother symbols besides the breast, which has not been my symbol of motherhood. I look through the Bible and search for moms without pregnant bellies. I continue to search for stories of adoptive moms, like Pharaoh's daughter finding Moses in the basket.

When I was young I played with lots of dolls and "mothered" my cat by dressing it up. I was often told "when you're a mom . . .," and I assumed when I grew up I would get married and have children. As a teenager, my friends and I would stuff pillows under our shirts and pretend we were pregnant. When I was in high school, I roomed with a friend who was nuts about babies. She'd cut out pictures of babies and talk about when she would be a mom. As I grew up I saw slides of myself as a child and thought I was going to have such a little girl too, with brown eyes like my mother, and brown straight hair and a pout on her face.

I am a mother now, and as I stare into my daughter's bright blue eyes I realize I have had to say goodbye to the biological mother I assumed I would be. Miranda, my daughter, joined our family through adoption.

I am currently also a foster mom of Jared. We brought him home from the hospital when he was 6 days old and now at almost a year and a half, he feels like our son in every way except legally. He is our daughter's biological brother, and we hope to adopt him, but the courts are still deciding this.

Because I did not really plan to be a foster mom, I often find it difficult to explain the relationship I have with this little one. I tell different people different things, depending how well I know them. I might tell strangers, "Yes, they are both mine." If I'm only with Miranda, I sometimes say I just have one. Sometimes I say we're fostering but that often leads to too many questions. If I say "son" I feel like I'm lying, but remembering all the diaper changes, sleepless nights and hours, weeks and months we've spent together, I feel like his mom. I am his mother now; I may not always be.

I look at my friends who have had their own birth children and wonder what it must be like not to "share" that child with the child's birth parents. Our children's birth parents are often in our minds—their physical features and their actions. Whether it is legitimate or not, whenever I don't understand my children's temper tantrums or actions I assume it must come from their genetic make-up.

Because Jared's birth parents may be allowed to parent him, during this fostering process with him I have been asked if our 3 1/2-year-old girl will be taken too. I am struck by how odd this sounds because she is our daughter. She has lived with us from 4 months of age, and we have assumed full care and responsibility for her. We have loved her and nurtured her as any other parent. I can't imagine any of my birth parent friends (isn't the terminology cumbersome when it's not assumed?) being asked this question. I realize that despite being her protector, provider and nurturer since she was a baby, in society's eyes it is really only a legal piece of paper that makes me her mom. Yet I am her mom. I am proud of her accomplishments, I brag about her looks and her eccentricities.

"I grew up experiencing a 'Mennonite' as someone with a Mennonite last name, someone born into the culture. The last name itself was a symbol of being Mennonite."

"Perhaps adopted Mennonites are also glad when the 'name game' is over and they can get down to the basics of talking about their faith."

Redefining "mom" for me has happened over the years much like redefining "Mennonite." Both concepts, "mom" and "Mennonite" have connoted blood connections. I remember when a friend found out I was Mennonite he said, "But you don't look Mennonite!" I'm not sure exactly what he meant but I took it as a compliment. Mennonites in Manitoba are predominantly ethnically homogeneous or birth Mennonites, born into historically Mennonite families. Around the world there are Mennonites who have joined the faith in other ways than through blood. I grew up experiencing a "Mennonite" as someone with a Mennonite last name, someone born into the culture. The last name itself was a symbol of being Mennonite.

Redefining both "mother" and "Mennonite" has not been easy. It is hard to undo assumptions and images you've grown up with. It has taken an open mind, other role models, rituals and experiences for me to broaden these definitions.

One important experience that helped me to redefine both Mennonite and mother was the St. Louis Mennonite Fellowship, of which I was a part in my Mennonite Voluntary Service experience. Here was a group of Mennonites, "ethnic" and "non-ethnic," all being Mennonites. There were many persons who chose to adopt the Mennonite faith. It didn't matter what your last name was or if you ate *rollkuchen* for *faspa* or not. This group of believers all worshiped together as Mennonites. These Mennonites did not have Prussian Mennonite ancestor stories but had their own stories of coming home to the Mennonite faith. This was very refreshing for a southern Manitoba Mennonite like me.

Three couples in that fellowship were also adoptive parents. I saw "family" in a new light. I was so impressed with these caring parents. I remember thinking I wanted to be an adoptive mom too. These parents were important role models for me. Many of their children represented various cultural backgrounds, which also broadened my definition of family. A Mennonite family in St. Louis "looked" different than a Mennonite family in Altona but both were rich in heritage and faith.

Rituals are important ways to affirm and confirm one's reality. Two very important events helped me become a mom when our daughter joined our family. The first ritual was a transfer ceremony. This was a ceremony in which our daughter was symbolically "transferred" from her birth parents to us, her adoptive parents. Candles were lit representing both sets of parents, those who gave birth, and those who will raise and nurture her. This event was very

important for all of us. We had the birth parents' blessing to raise her, and that felt very affirming.

The other event was a shower given by our friends, family and church. I was overwhelmed by people's generosity and good wishes. In adoption, the word "entitlement" is often used to describe the process in which parents become bonded or attached to their new child. To have so many persons who were our support system say, "Yes, you are now Miranda's parents" was a very important step in becoming her mom.

My "mom" status is different with Jared. Neither of these rituals have been possible for us. We have been unable to officially celebrate his birth or rally our friends and family in the entitlement process. I have even been leery of gifts or cards because legality issues are not settled. We have no legal status as his parents nor do we have his birth parents' blessing. For now, I am his mom, and I have missed that we have not really had a ritual that acknowledges that. I keep saying we are going to have a big party when and if this happens, or have a goodbye ritual that would acknowledge the care we have given him so far.

The adoption community has also become an important support group for me. It's great to go to a picnic with other parents who have adopted, to be with other adoptive moms, like myself, who have reclaimed what it means to be a mom without the breast or labor story. We each have our own adoption stories of bringing our babies home with our slim figures and flat breasts.

I am glad that the frequency of labor-home-birth stories has lessened as my babies grow into children. The conversation is moving toward discipline issues, swimming lessons and nursery schools. Perhaps adopted Mennonites are also glad when the "name game" is over and they can get down to the basics of talking about their faith.

I read through a book of affirmations for new moms that my mom gave me, and I want to rip up all the pages of birth stories and nursing. Yet I find myself on the pages of other days, and I say, "I am the same, and I am different than birth moms." Perhaps I will rewrite one of those affirmation books and include some stork stories too.

Yvonne Stoesz has a master's degree in social work, works as a social worker on a casual basis, but spends most of her time parenting two children. She is married to Brent Gouthro and lives in Morden, Man.

by Annetta Miller

Witchcraft?

The *matatu** was fairly crowded
as I squeezed into place.

I was on my way
to rehearse the Nairobi Orchestra
in preparation for a rendition of Brahms' Requiem

I opened the large conductor's score
and mentally rehearsed some of the difficult spots

The Kikuyu man across from me
nudged his partner
and asked in Swahili
"Is that a book?"
"Indeed, it is a book
but what kind of book?"

Then the lady sitting next to me
peered over my shoulder for a long time
and then whispered to her neighbor
"*Ni uchawi*"*

Although I understood the conversations around me
I chose to remain silent

How could I explain the complicated notation
of a conductor's score
in the twenty minute ride?

How could I explain
that the piece of music
which has had
some of the greatest spiritual impact
on my life
was by no means witchcraft?

To have told them
the book was music
would have meant nothing

Music for them is spontaneous and participatory
where the composer-performer-conductor-audience are
one

How could I explain that in the West
we separate the composer, performer, conductor and
audience?

And that I was taking the role
of the conductor in trying to prepare the performers
to sing and play
for a totally silent audience?

And that this large book
was full of symbols (sounds)
written by a man
who wanted it
to be used as a map, a blueprint?

And that the singers'
could not sing without it
and that the instrumentalists
could not play without it?

And that I could not rehearse
or conduct without it?

Ni uchawi?

* public transport van
* It's witchcraft

MCC worker Annetta Miller teaches music at Daystar University in Nairobi, Kenya. She and husband, Harold, have lived and worked six years in Tanzania, two years in Sudan and 26 years in Kenya. The Millers attend the Quaker Meeting in Nairobi.

by Annetta Miller

Aesthetics

She had called that score
of Brahms' Requiem
witchcraft

That lady seated beside me
on the *matatu*
when I was on my way
to conduct the orchestra
in a rehearsal
of Brahms' Requiem

She had not understood
the notation of that large, Western musical score

"Witchcraft"
she had called it

Over fifty years ago
when my parents
first came to Africa
they heard
the songs and dances
of Africa

participatory
functional
rhythmically vibrant
using instruments
drums
tones
which they did not understand

"Witchcraft"
they had called it

Witchcraft?

Brahms' Requiem
was my cultural heritage

Witchcraft

Her songs and dances
were her cultural heritage

Could she ever understand
my Brahms' Requiem?

Could I ever fully understand
her songs and dances?

To try to understand
takes time
energy
perception

knowing full well
that beauty and aesthetics
when cross-culturally understood

provide a cross-cultural
reference point

a magic
all its own.

"Witchcraft?" and "Aesthetics" are from a book of poetry by
Annetta Miller, *Sharing Boundaries: Musings on Cross-Cultural
Living*.

Letters

Women's Concerns Report welcomes your comments. Letters to the editor may be edited for length and clarity.

I have been reading *Women's Concerns Report* for some years, and while I don't always agree with a number of the viewpoints expressed, I certainly appreciate the variety of opinions and depth of feeling expressed in the articles. Often I find the writers more free-thinking than I feel I am, and I wonder if I'm more conservative than many of the readers of *Report*.

But "conservative" and "liberal" are relative terms. The January-February issue, containing articles on passing on non-sexist values to children and feminine views of God, came at an interesting time for me. Compared to many women in my church, I'm more on the liberal end of the scale. A group of women were speaking recently on the state of our (broader) Mennonite church, and one woman commented that the trouble with our conference (at least further east, where more liberal ideas flourish) was that there are homosexuals in the church and women behind the pulpit, and women are keeping their own names when they marry! Another commented that she was disturbed that at some conferences, God is referred to in feminine terms, when the Bible clearly states that God is "father."

A thousand responses raced through my mind (there are homosexuals in our churches, whether we admit to it or not; God has gifted women as well as men in the church; taking or not taking a spouse's surname is a personal choice, not a law or spiritual issue; and to think of God as a loving father is not wrong but is limiting, for isn't God greater than either male or female?), but I chose not to open my mouth for fear of saying the wrong thing and being totally misunderstood. Given what I perceived as the limited perspective of the persons present, I didn't even try. But I did wonder what that particular group of women would think of some of the feminist ideas presented in the January-February issue that arrived shortly afterwards.

Perhaps readers of this periodical have a skewed perspective. Those who choose to subscribe to the *Report* are more free-thinking and accepting of different ideas. It is easy then to

think that perhaps the majority of women in the Mennonite church are in agreement on certain issues. But this is not so, even among conferences. I could write a book on the differences I've observed between General Conference Mennonites in central Kansas (where I grew up) and in British Columbia (where I now live). It would behoove all of us to remember that "women's concerns" cover a wide variety of perspectives, because Mennonite women do. I realize that no periodical can cater to all women and men concerned with women's issues. But whenever the *Report* comes, and I always read it with interest, I have to remind myself that many women in our churches would find it difficult if not impossible to relate to most of the articles appearing within. The issues discussed simply are not issues for them.

—Amy Dueckman, Abbotsford BC

Dear Editor,

Greetings in Jesus' name. I had the privilege of reading your *Women's Concerns Report*. I have appreciated the issue on infertility. I strongly feel that our library should have your magazine regularly since it benefits a community of theological students of 300 people who in turn can influence the society at large. Yours sincerely in Christ,

—Rev. E. D. Solomon, Shamshabad, India

To the editors,

In response to Sharon K. Heath's letter in the September-October 1997 issue, following the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, I would be willing to listen to what Mennonite lesbians have to say, just as I would hope that they would be willing to listen to those who don't agree with their views.

—anonymous

News and verbs

We welcome your submissions to "News and verbs." This column features a wide variety of news about the interests and activities of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ women. We welcome news about groups and individuals.

- The administrative committee of the **Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund** invites applications for study/work projects which further Epp's vision for mission in Canada and throughout the world. The committee annually distributes approximately \$2500 to support projects dealing with history, peacemaking (particularly in the Middle East), Mennonite ecumenicity and the Christian faith. Preference is given to Mennonite and Brethren in Christ persons who are studying or working in Canada. Application forms are available from: Sam Steiner, Administrator, Frank H. Epp Memorial Fund, Conrad Grebel College, Waterloo, Ont. N2L 3G6, Canada. Applications must be received by November 15, 1997. The award will be announced in February 1998.
- Goshen College seeks applicants for a tenure-track **teaching position in adult-health and acute-care nursing**. Qualifications include master's degree (doctorate preferred) and teaching experience. Responsibilities include teaching junior-level clinical courses and working with other faculty members in curriculum development, implementation and evaluation. Beginning date is no later than January 1998. Men and people from under-represented groups are encouraged to apply. Send letter of application, resumé and professional references to Paul A. Keim, Academic Dean, Goshen, IN, 46526. E-mail: dean@goshen.edu. Application through the Goshen College web site at www.goshen.edu is encouraged.
- **"Gathered Hope: Women at Mennonite World Conference"** is an 11 minute slide set with narration for reading and discussion questions. Schedule "Gathered Hope" in your women's group program and hear about the lives of Mennonite sisters around the world. Order from: Mennonite Women, 722 Main Street, Newton, KS 67114
- **"Claiming the Promise"** is a new seven session adult Bible study curriculum on homosexuality. The curriculum lends itself to an evening Bible study format since each session contains two hours worth of material. The leader's guide provides guidelines for adapting the curriculum for 45 minute and 60 minute sessions. "Claiming the Promise" is published by the Reconciling Congregation Program of the United Methodist Church and can be ordered through the Supportive Congregations Network, PO Box 6300, Minneapolis, MN 55406. For more information call 612-722-6906 or e-mail SCNetwork@aol.com.
- Call Educational Resources at Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA) at 1-800-348-7468 to receive a promotional brochure describing their **new wellness program, the Healthy Living Series**. This flexible program is for both individuals and groups and focuses on helping participants make lifestyle changes with support from others. Topics include nutrition, exercise, stress, finances, spirituality and other issues. Cost is determined by whether an individual owns an MMA product.
- Submissions wanted for an international anthology: Poems and personal accounts wanted from women around the world about their experience of **life under religious fundamentalism**. Maximum length is 3,000 words. Deadline for submission is June 1, 1998. Send to Deb Ellis, Box 204, Dunnville, Ont., Canada, N1A 2X5. Phone 905-774-8091.
- **Women for Women in Afghanistan** is a solidarity group working to support women in Afghanistan and Afghan women in the refugee camps. We would like to hear from those who are interested in this work, and from those who are doing other forms of solidarity work with women. Please contact us at Box 204, Dunnville, Ont., Canada, N1A 2X5. Phone 905-774-8091.

Illustrations in this issue were drawn by Teresa Pankratz of Chicago. Please do not reproduce without permission.



Upcoming themes

Following are themes scheduled for issues of the *Women's Concerns Report* in coming months. We welcome suggestions for contributors for these issues:

- Women educating children
- Our images of God; images of ourselves
- Women's progress and backlash
- Rape as a war crime
- Forgiveness

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Gwen Groff. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer Design.

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Women in Ministry

Ruth Penner, Hope Church, Wichita, Kan., is pastoral intern at First Church, Moundridge, Kan.

Brenda Isaacs is full-time interim pastor at First Mennonite Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Dawn Yoder Harms is associate pastor at Akron (Pa.) Mennonite Church.

Dora and George Hoeppner are senior pastors at Bethel Church, Aldergrove, B.C.

Phil and Julie Bender are pastors at Hamilton (Ont.) Mennonite Church.

Cheryl Hershberger was ordained as associate pastor of congregational life at Hesston (Kan.) Mennonite Church.

Sue Steiner began as a transition pastor at Black Creek Mennonite Church, Toronto, Ont.

Doris Weber began as transition pastor at Danforth Mennonite Church Toronto Ont.

Chris Birky and Bill Beck were licensed as associate pastors at Hopewell Mennonite Church, Kouts, Ind.

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